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ABSTRACT

Educational reformists have asserted that collaborative relationships between universities and local education agencies must be firmly established if improvements are to occur in the preservice preparation of school administrators. One collaboration format involves practica and other field-based learning opportunities for aspiring administrators. Although the emerging "learning by doing" emphasis might seem appropriate, uncritical and wholesale acceptance of this approach would be a big mistake. This paper identifies some common assumptions about practica and raises additional issues that need to be considered by policy-makers and designers of administrator preparation programs. First the rationale for practica is examined, using the literature on preservice teacher education, because scant material pertaining to administrator field-based practices is available. Next, the supposed benefits, such as assessing career commitment, refining school goals, practicing in realistic settings, developing competence, and promoting personal professional development, are examined and critiqued for programmatic shortcomings. The same treatment is accorded assumptions related to structure, including implementation and ultimate effectiveness considerations. To counteract the paper's pessimistic observations, several recommendations concerning program control, needed skills, administrator role models, and research needs are provided. Included are seven references. (MLH)

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MAJOR ASSUMPTIONS OF THE PRACTICUM TO PREPARE ADMINISTRATORS: HOW VALID ARE THEY?

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MAJOR ASSUMPTIONS OF THE PRACTICUM TO PREPARE ADMINISTRATORS: HOW VALID ARE THEY?

A persistent belief expressed in much of the recent literature directed toward improving the quality of preservice preparation programs for educators is that such efforts will be enhanced if more effective ways can be found for collaborative efforts involving universities and local education agencies. This is true of the preparation of teachers as well as educational administrators. In general, it is assumed that such activities will serve as a way to bridge the gap that is said to exist between administrative theories as they are presented in traditional university courses and practice that is found in the everyday "real world" work of schools. The belief that such activities have great value as part of the preservice preparation of school administrators is gaining strength and support. State departments of education across the United States have increasingly endorsed the need for would-be administrators to learn more about their future duties by spending time involved with practica. In the past 15 years, the number of states requiring some form of internship or planned field experience as a part of initial certification standards for administrators has increased from 10 to 25 (Gousha, LoPresti, and Jones, 1986). In addition, the recent report issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration, a group that reviewed the status of administrative preparation programs across North America, affirmed once again the longstanding belief that there is a value in reliance on experiental learning as a key to the more effective preparation of school administrators (UCEA, 1987).

It is clear that the preparation of school administrators is moving rather quickly toward increased reliance on field-based training activities. In large measure, a considerable amount of the energies of the UCEA Center on Field Relations in Educational Administration Training Programs, co-hosted by The Ohio State University and the University of Cincinnati, have been devoted to the documentation and tracing of this fact. Despite the movement toward field-based programs, however, it is appropriate to step back from the mainstream to consider the extent to which the assumptions which typically are utilized to support such programs appear to be valid and make sense. This paper will examine the nature of a number of generally-accepted assumptions and raise additional issues that need to be considered by policy-makers and designers of administrator preparation programs.

Rationale for The Practicum

It is somewhat surprising to note that, while there are numerous recommendations suggesting the need to improve the quality of field-based administrator preparation activities, the literature concerning this aspect of educational administration programs is presently not well-developed. The majority of recent descriptions of the practicum in educational administration training have had their conceptual grounding in the area teacher education (Daresh, 1987). The existing literature has left virtually no specific direction for assisting those who are interested in increasing their understanding of practica utilized for the training of educational leaders.

Due to the fact that there has been a fairly rich literature base in the field of preservice teacher education, however, there does exist some descriptions of the desirable practices and underlying assumptions that are in place for the use of field-based practica in professional education. Turney (1973) provided the following succinct statement of the rationale for making use of practica in preparing educational personnel:

> Ideally conceived the practicum is a powerful series of professional experiences in which student teachers apply, refine, and reconstruct theoretical learnings, and through which they develop their training competence. The practicum is an integral part of the programme of teacher education contributing to the achievement of its aims and closely related to its content competence.

Obviously, this statement is directed primarily toward the world of initial training for classroom teachers, and it may be criticized as being inappropriate for school administrators. The emphasis, for example, on the use of student teaching as a way to help people to "refine their teaching competence" is hardly comparable to the problem of finding a place for prospective administrators to "refine their administrative skills" which are in no way similar to the discrete, observable tasks involved with teaching. Nevertheless, it appears that this rationale has some conceptual power and value to future school leaders and their preservice training involving the use of field-based practica. It seems to make "good sense" that an effective way to enable people to understand the linkage between theory learned in universities and practice in the "real world" of schools is to expect that future school executives would spend some time working in a school, at least on a part-time basis, before going out into the world of administration for the first time.

The major problem with this view of the need for "practical" and field-based learning is that, while it appears on the surface to make a good deal of sense, it does include certain assumptions which deserve to receive some analysis and scrutiny before being accepted at complete face value. Once again, the description of Turney (1973) is helpful because it provides a good framework that specifies quite clearly the nature of a practicum to prepare educational personnel:

1. (The practicum enables individuals) to test their commitment to...a career...;
2. ...to gain insight into the preparation of a ...school (its) goals, and how they may be achieved;
3. ...to apply knowledge and skills gained through college studies in a practical setting;
4. ...to progressively develop...competencies through participation in a range of practical experiences;
5 ...to evaluate progress and identify areas where further (personal and professional) development is needed.

Prevailing Assumptions

Based largely on the statements of rationale just reviewed, and also on issues typically associated with the preservice preparation of school administrators in general, it is possible to list a series of prevailing assumptions that are related to the use of the practicum in administrative trainings. These assumptions may be classified in two major categories. The first consists of assumptions based on potential benefits to be derived from the practicum. The second set comes from the structure of administrative preparation programs. In the sections of this paper that follow, these two sets of assumptions will be reviewed to determine the extent to which they appear to be valid as justifications of the trust now placed on the practicum to prepare educational administrators.

Assumptions Related to Benefits

As noted earlier in the statement provided by Turney (1982) to describe the typical objectives for the use of student teaching, most of the rationale for that field are assumptions related to the potential benefits for the practicum in administration as well. The practicum may be a way to help individuals make career choices, refine goals, engage in realistic practice, increase personal competence, and promote personal professional development.

Assessing Career Commitment

At first glance, it would appear quite logical to assume that, as a person gets a chance to go out into the field to practice certain types of administrative skills and behaviors, this would be an ideal time to make a decision concerning the appropriateness of following a career in administration. In short, this suggest that a very likely, if not highly probable, outcome derived from participation in field-based activities might be for a percentage of individuals who engage in this type of learning to decide, in fact, that a life as a school administrator is simply not appealing. Success in the field experience, then, might cue a decision to stay in the classroom and not try for the principal's office.

While there is little doubt that such a possible outcome would be commendable, it seems quite unlikely that this assumed function of field experiences will be realized. The fact is that, for the most part, planned

field experiences will be realized. The fact is that, for the most part, planned field experiences and other forms of practica are required activities for students of educational administration either near the end of their academic programs, or after other course requirements for a degree have been completed. In addition, it is important to note that the administrative practicum, although increasing in popularity, is still not a universal expectation of students aspiring to serve as educational leaders in the future. By and large, the internship, planned field experience, or other similar types of field-based practical requirements are still somewhat of an "add-on" to academic programs in the majority of institutions that serve to prepare educational administrators (Daresh, 1986).

The consequence of field-based practica programs being required or included toward the end of preservice education and preparation is that such a practice tends to limit or negate entirely the likelihood of such programs serving to guide people in making career choices. There is little doubt that, after an individual has invested time, money and other resources in an educational program to the point where that program is virtually finished, it is extremely improbable that the person will suddenly change his or her mind about wanting to be an administrator afater a few weeks "out in the field." Of course, it may be argued that many who study school administration do not actively pursue leadership roles, regardless of their experiences in the field. There is, however, a major contradiction found in the suggestion that a field-based learning experience can test one's commitment to a career if the commitment has already been forced to some degree. If this issue is indeed a problem, the logical recommendation would

be to suggest earlier field experiences and placements for aspiring administrators, perhaps even to the point where a period of time in the field would be a prerequisite to engaging in any further academic preparation. The message in such an arrangement would clearly be, "If you're not interested, don't waste your time." Incidentally, this same logic has been applied increasingly to undergraduate teacher preparation programs where one of the first required courses for many students is some tipe of early entrance field experience as a way to enable students to "test the water".

Beyond this issue, there are other serious impediments to the fulfillment of the promise of field-based practica serving to help guide students in career planning. The most obvious of these is one that is carried out as a theme in reviewing the other assumptions in this paper. Career guidance requires a deep and serious commitment by people who are willing to work on a continuous basis with aspiring administrators. These people might come from the ranks of university professors, or they may be practitioners in the field. What is crucial to this role is the overriding concern that the career guide would demonstrate for the interests of the candidate. Although it may be a rather unhappy observation, it is appropriate to note that the dominant theme in most existing preservice programs for administrators is one of "getting people through courses" as a way of finding the fastest and most effective route to the goal of an administrative position. Energy is directed toward getting people through programs, not at the needs and interests of the individuals in the programs. Career guidance is not a facet of administrative preparation

programs at present, and the skills needed to assist administrative candidates with their individual decision making are not often displayed (because they may not be valued) by thoses who are charged with the responsibility of preparing administrators.

Refining School Goals

An overarching theme that would appear to be legitimate in the discussion of any aspect of educational practice, particularly the preservice preparation of school administrators, might be that no such discussion is worthwhile unless its focus is ultimately on the improvement of school practices. As a result, proposals to improve field-based programs for preparing administrators, teachers, and other educational personnel would seem to require that deliberate attention must be paid to the opportunities that exist for the field experience to serve as a way to clarify school goals. In most current situations, however, the field-based practicum does not truly offer the opportunity to participants to focus on or modify the quality of school goals.

The majority of internships, field experiences, and other forms of practica for preparing administrators are limited in their potential to have much of an impact on real issues in schools as organizations, including the nature of the school goals of the schools. Field-based training programs are all too frequently treated as opportunities for individuals to "play at" being administrators rather than engaging in real leadership situations. It is of little surprise, then, to note that there is little or no effect felt in the organization by the participation of someone playing out an apprenticeship. The common norm seems to hold that the school should return

completely to its original status after a person has made an appearance in the capacity of an internship. Change does not happen typically because it is not supposed to happen, in much the same way that long-lasting change in a classroom after a student teacher has worked there for a short time. Goals and practices remain as they were prior to the intern's intervention, and this occurs as the result of convention or design rather than by the fault of the intern. The message that is sent clearly in this regard might be that "Interns should be seen and not heard."

Practicing in Realistic Settings

This assumption might easily be described as the one which is most often cited as a rationale for requiring students of school administration to spend more time in field settings as part of their preservice preparation. The belief expressed here is that a person who receives training only in the theory of administration through university courses will be poorly prepared (or not prepared at all) to step out into the real world of schools to perform effectively as an administrator. Once again, there is little possible argument with this basic concept.

In practice, however, the notion of allowing people to "learn by doing" as administrators is frequently reduced to a less-than-satisfying experience. Practicing administrative and leadership skills in a realistic setting often means providing full-time classroom teachers to take a few minutes during the school day to "play at" being school administrators by doing such things as making telephone calls to the homes of absent students, supervising school bus loadings and unloadings, and monitoring the lunch room. The problem with such experiences is not that they do not consist of

some of the things that real, live school administrators do on their jobs; principals do make phone calls, stand in front of the building when the buses roll in, wander through the cafeteria, and dozens of other similar tasks that, while appearing trivial on the surface, are part of the business of keeping a school going and setting a tone. The problem with using such tasks as the basis of an administrative practicum, however, is that they simply represent a very limited and fragmented view of what administration is all about, or what it could be. The aspiring administrator who learns about the principal's role by only checking out the rest rooms or by filling out forms that the central office wants but the principal does not wish to complete does not see the total life of a school principal. This may, in fact, be one of the most fundamental notions or assumptions about the value of the practicum--that one learns by doing tasks assigned to the principal--but it may also be the assumption that contains the greatest fallacy. It may not, in fact, be possible to do what a principal or any other administrator does. The essence of school administration may be defined as the process of making decisions "that count." An aspiring administrator engaged in a field-based practicum may not be able to make such decisions.

Developing Competence

In many respects, the problem with this assumption is similar to what was just noted concerning the third assumption above. What is suggested here is that the person who does not gain practical experiences before employment will be incompetent on the job, while the person who engages in preservice practical experiences will be successful. For one

thing, a brief review of the field will show one that this is false. There are some very talented administrators who never engaged in a preservice practicum; they have been "learning by doing" each day that they have been on the job. By contrast, there are also terrible administrators who participated in sophisticated preservice internships or other forms of practica. Simply assuming that one learns by doing practical things is an incorrect assumption.

The issue of learning by doing is not a sufficient way for people to learn to perform any role. Proponents of experiental learning theories such as Kolb (1976) have long noted that the true value of going out into the field to learn practical skills is not found in the practice per se, but rather in the reflection that the individual engages in after completing the practical activity. In short, "It isn't what you do, but what you learn about doing it that counts." Practice without reflection, as Dewey noted in 1938, is not a great value to learning anything.

The problem again is that reflection requires guidance from others who work with the learner to help the thinking process. This guidance takes time and requires a true concern for the learner as an individual. Unfortunately, preparation of administrative candidates in many universities is not a very personalized process. The type of care required to guide people through a true reflective learning cycle is simply not a part of most programs. Without this commitment, however, learning to be an administrator by practicing skills in a realistic setting is a process that will work only occasionally and if the aspiring candidate is lucky. Competence, in any case, will certainly not be assured.

Promoting Personal Professional Development

If reflection on learning is not typically included as part of most preservice administrative programs, it is quite unlikely that the promise inherent in this stated assumption can ever be realized. If the practicum can be used as a type of "laboratory" where a candidate can determine his or her personal strengths and weaknesses as a prelude to determining areas for further professional and personal development, the practicum must be conceived of as something more than an opportunity to go out into schools to try out some skills. Without a strong relfective component that asks for the candidate to review personal goals and objectives, the internship or field experience will likely never be much more than another hurdle for people to go through "on the way to" gaining a license to administer. Once again, the assumption that mere participation in a practicum will have a benefit on a person's individual growth and formation as a school leader is not supported by what is seen in practice around the nation.

Assumptions Related To Structure

Two sets of assumptions are related to the basic structure of practica utilized to prepare educational administrators. The first of these deals with governance issues, or the ways in which practica are implemented. The second group is related to the belief that people will, in fact, learn by doing

Implementing Practica

There are assumptions concerning the ways in which practica are implemented. For example, the first assumption seems to be that the

responsibility for providing field-based programs is one that is controlled by the university. Although there are some situations where local districts have in fact taken the challenge to provide practical learning experiences for future administrators, the internship, field experience, and other types of practica are normally viewed as things that one must complete through the auspices of a university. Clearly, one must question the logic of turning this duty over to those who have the greatest skills in the area of sharing theory bases. Can professors really be effective at leading students through field experiences? Tied to this is another issue. There is a traditional view that, as students engage in field experiences in real world settings, a person from the university is to monitor these experiences by spending a lot of time with candidates in the field. This makes a good deal of sense in the supervision of student teachers where a university faculty member can come to a school to watch a teacher work with a class of students for a few hours to make some judgments about the quality of the person's teaching skills. The same cannot happen in the monitoring of administrative practica. It is impossible to go out to a school and watch a person "administer" at any particular point in time. Supervision of administrative candidates in the field must be almost constant, or it is really not worth the effort. As a result, there is considerable value in thinking about the need for practitioners to assume very actively the overseeing of interns. At present, however, universities are extremely reluctant to give up the power to monitor and evaluate their candidates in the field.

Assuming Value

The second set of general assumption concerning the field-based program for preparing administrators deals with the fundamental issue of

whether or not this practice, while seemingly a sound one based on logic, really does make any difference in the effectiveness of a practicing administrator. It is so well-grounded as an assumption that people will learn better if they learn by doing that no one has really examined the long-term benefits of a person serving a time in a field-based preparation program. In a recent review of the status of research on the internship and field experience in administrative preparation programs, Daresh (1987) found that the impact of such programs on administrator effectiveness has not been studied with any consistency. Instead, research on interships has tended to be limited to the analysis of such things as whether a particular local program "worked"--typically defined as whether or not participants in the program said that they enjoyed the activities. We simply do not as yet have a sufficient data base concerning the long-term benefits of administrative field-based preparation programs to allow us to say with any absolute certainty that such activities will build better leaders. Two possible explanations come to mind. The first is that the reasearch questions along these lines have not been asked to date. The second more basic issue is probably found in the fact that we do not truly have a clear picture in our minds of what an "effective" administrator should be. This leads to a situation where we assume that field-based programs are probably helpful, but we do not know toward what end they should help. What is a good administrator?

Recommendations

The observations made in this paper present a somewhat pessimistic view of the nature of field-based administrator preparation programs. Nevertheless, the logic of enabling people to learn in real world settings is too compelling to allow us to ignore the potential value of internships, field experiences, and other activities. Included here are some recommendations that might be useful in confronting some of the objections noted earlier.

First of all, practices associated with the use of field-based learning programs will not be improved until there is some agreement reached concerning the issue of who will control the process of preparing school administrators. As noted earlier, there is currently a strong assumption that universities prepare school administrators. This is not necessarily a realistic belief, however. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to consider too deeply the issue of whether practitioners or professors (or others) should control administrative preparation in this country. What is important to suggest, however, is that field-based preparation activities will be much more effective if carried out in a climate where there is emphasis placed on the value of true collaborative relationships involving all the parties who have a stake in the preparation of administrators. Only through such efforts will there be a likely change in the attitudes that exist relative to working with aspiring administrators. Someone must care about the people who are going through administrator preparation programs,

and a recommendation for increasing this care if found in the belief that dialogue must be carried out to determine precise roles and responsibilities that may be shared between universities and local school systems.

A second recommendation involves the need to develop more of a focus on the kinds of skills that are needed by those who work most closely with administrator candidates. The popular term of "mentor" may be a bit over-used today, but is is a concept that might well be explored as a serious attempt to find people who are willing to work with aspiring administrators to help them engage in reflective activities that might form personal images of administration for the future. Also, mentoring may be a way to make certain that proper career guidance can be viewed as a part of the preservice field-based practicum.

A third set of suggestions is related to the fact that careful examination is needed of the value of simply placing candidates in situations where they are supposed to learn by doing. A basic flaw in our present practice is that is assumes ultimately that we want future administrators to do what present administrators are doing. Clearly, this is not a desirable prospect. The improvement of field-based preparation programs will require the development not of more ways to put people into field settings, but rather to increase opportunities for administrative candidates to be guided through a process of individual formation. Again, as noted earlier, it is not sufficient for people to learn how to do certain things as future administrators. What is more significant is the fact that people will learn to recognize why they are doing what they do. This can be achieved by a focus on administrative formation rather than mere presevice training.

Finally, more focused research needs to be conducted on the best ways to understand what values are really to be found in administrative practica. If these programs are simply activities that students "like to take," often because they are said to be more interesting than other university courses, there is probably little long-term value in maintaining efforts to keep these activities. On the other hand, if it can be shown that there is a relationship between field-based programs and success on the job, all efforts to improve these programs are worthwhile. In the meantime, however further research is clearly needed.

Summary

The calls for reform in educational administration training programs have made it abundantly clear that collaborative relationships between universities and local school districts must be firmly established if improvements are to occur in the preservice preparation of school leaders. One of the most obvious ways that such collaboration may take place is in the development of field-based learning opportunities for aspiring administrators. While this emerging emphasis on the importance of "learning by doing" seems to at first to be reasonable, caution must be exercised before there is an uncritical and wholesale acceptance of this approach as a wholly acceptable replacement to existing strategies utilized in many preservice preparation programs.

The purpose of this paper was to identify some of the most consistent assumptions regarding field-based learning. It is still assumed

that there are values to be derived from field-based programs. However, the view here has been that such programs are in no way to be understood as a panacea that will cure all the ills of administrative preparation programs. Those interested in long-term improvement need to review the nature of their assumptions to determine if those assumptions are being supported in the real practices of field-based programs. If they are not, changes must occur.

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